NONFICTION

The Third Angel of Chernobyl – by Carmel Bird

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It grows like a weed. Its ferny leaves are soft, floppy, silvery-greeny-grey. It is wormwood, and it signifies bitterness. I think the one in my garden is *Artemisia absinthium*. Of the four different types of wormwood listed in *Culpeper's Complete Herbal* of 1653, that seems to be what it is. I grow it, partly because I like the soft foliage and also the aroma of the bruised leaves, and partly because I dry it and mix it with lavender and various other herbs and spices to discourage the breeding of moths that eat silk and wool. Well, it's really a war against moths, with wormwood as the principal weapon. When I put little bags of this mixture into drawers and cupboards, I often reflect on the

And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters. And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood, and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter.

There is no evidence that wormwood is any use in combatting COVID-19, although apparently there were rumours to that effect in 2020.

In the centre of the Ukrainian town of Chernobyl there is a glorious statue of the third angel, unveiled there on 26 April 2011, the 25th anniversary of the nuclear disaster which overtook the town in 1986. It is part of a memorial park dedicated to the memory of the people whose lives have been lost in different ways as a result of the explosion. Why choose this angel? The simple answer is that the Ukrainian word for wormwood is ‘chernobyl’. There is a more complex story to be told.

I write this in February 2022, beginning on Valentine’s Day. The whole world, suffering from the pestilence of COVID, is focused on the question of whether Russia is or is not going to invade Ukraine, which has been a separate and troubled country since 1991. By 17 February, the suspense

cyber attacks, described by newsreaders as ‘malicious internet traffic’.

However, the real reason for my sudden interest in the trumpeting angel in the Wormwood Star Memorial Complex in Chernobyl is much closer to home. Recently my grand-daughter Edith, having just returned to school after the broken student years of 2020 and 2021, was given a choice of disasters to research for the purpose of writing a piece of fiction. These disasters included the Titanic, and the death of Princess Diana, and the destruction of the Twin Towers, among other terrible topics. Edith chose Chernobyl. Wondering about the educational thinking behind such a project at such a time, I became more interested in Chernobyl than I had ever been before.

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As Russian troops hover on the brink, by a personal little coincidence, here in the silence and summer heat of rural Victoria, I am concentrating on the history of Ukraine. Apart from my *King James Bible* and my *Culpeper’s Complete Herbal*, I seem to have only one other currently useful reference on my bookshelves. This is *Atlas Obscura*, published in 2016. Although it is one of my favourite reference books, I don’t think I had ever read before the relevant brief entry about Chernobyl on page 98. I am in fact relying on internet material of one kind and another. (If Edith had chosen the Princess Diana, or even the Titanic option, this would be a very different matter, and I would not be writing an essay. I could have offered her a wealth of exciting material for inspiration and information.) I have ordered a book from a bookshop in Melbourne, but I must wait for the rural pandemic delivery. It’s a book for Edith, a graphic novel titled *The Lost Child of Chernobyl* by Helen Bate, published in 2021. Of course I am very keen to read it myself. Meanwhile I seem compelled to write, hoping that what I say bears some close enough resemblance to the truth. The story is dotted with dates and other numbers, as I piece together some sort of understanding of events.

In simple language, on 26 April 1986, when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, the flawed nuclear reactor number four in Chernobyl, operated by untrained workers, exploded, resulting in an

around that said some wines had never before had such sparkle. Hundreds of thousands of people were relocated. Eleven square kilometres of pine trees were destroyed, their green leaves suddenly turning to a frozen russet. The leaves did not fall, but hung in suspended spectral crimson shock. The whole area, a contaminated wasteland of radioactive trees, became known as the 'Red Forest'. Animals within a radius of 2600 square kilometres were shot, and an area of 30 square kilometres was established as the Exclusion Zone inside which public access has now been restricted for nearly 40 years.

A theme park in Pripyat, a town that is two kilometres from the Chernobyl power plant, was due to open a week after the nuclear explosion. Today it remains as an ironic and forlorn reminder of the past, with the abandoned Ferris wheel serving as a kind of grotesque symbol of all that has happened and not happened here. Nearby, a dusty jumble of bumper cars. Pripyat, once home to 50,000 people, is still almost uninhabited, although about 7,000 people now live and work in the surrounding area. Pripyat is a ghost town where, in a long-since abandoned nursery, there are rows of rusty cots, dolls smiling eerily in the silence. The clocks in Pripyat all read 11.55 which was the moment when the electricity to the town was cut on 26 April 1986. Since 2011 it has been possible for tourists to visit Chernobyl as it sits, a relic, a horror numbed across time. Alongside such places as the Bikini Atoll, Chernobyl is a location today for people interested in disaster tourism. 'Guided tours are available, and depart by bus from Kiev.'

As a result of the explosion, animals large and small disappeared from the area. However, today there is a thriving population that includes deer, wolves, bears, boar, foxes, badgers, and more. The list seems to me to resemble an abundant gathering of characters from children's fiction. There are fish and 200 types of birds. Before reading about Chernobyl, I had never heard of an endangered species of wild animal called Przewalski's Horse. These animals, looking rather like creatures from primitive cave paintings, have flourished again within the Exclusion Zone. I believe it is the only type of wild horse that has never been tamed.

Attracted by the mention of elephants, I read about the Elephant's Foot. Resembling the foot of an enormous elephant, this accidental structure is composed of nuclear fuel, melted concrete, and metal. It rises six metres above ground level, constructed from a substance in reactor number four simulating layers of black glassy leather. During the fires, this material burned through two metres of concrete and flowed through fissures and pipes to reach its destination where it formed the sculpture of the foot. It continues to be radioactive.

During the evening of 26 April 1976, witnesses in Chernobyl reported a vision of the Virgin Mary emerging from a strange cloud that descended upon the town. In each hand the woman held a tuft of wormwood which she proceeded to drop upon the earth. She moved over the town and stopped above the Church of the Prophet Elijah which she blessed with both hands, before disappearing into the heavens. People collected the scattered branches of the wormwood as evidence of the fact of the vision, and ten years later the incident was recalled and interpreted as being a prophecy of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

The next step in the construction of the supernatural narrative was to turn to the Third Angel in the *Book of Revelation*. The Angel and the Virgin and the star and the wormwood and the prophecy of apocalyptic doom all worked together to ring with a trumpet of truth and to sing with a kind of other-worldly consolation. When the Virgin and the *Book of Revelation* are involved, human beings, priests and people, can begin to discern in the signs the workings of heaven, the divine succour of hope and of salvation. The elegant Third Angel, gleaming, metallic, ethereal, soars above the hellish memories of Chernobyl.

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▼On 17 February, with more news of the cyber attacks on the banks, and no fresh news of the movement of troops, comes a text message from Australia Post saying *The Lost Child of Chernobyl* will arrive on my doorstep in four or five days from now. Then on 18 February the message is that after all it’s coming *today*, and I need to be sure the postman is safe from the dog. ‘Western leaders have threatened Moscow with a damaging package of sanctions in the event of a further incursion into Ukrainian soil. Cloud cover and radioactivity in the soil could determine when and where Russian troops make a possible move.’ They have shelled a village. ‘A rocket tore into a kindergarten.’ Tensions continue to simmer.

The book arrives at midday, bright colours, comic book format. I read it quickly, and it’s sad, powerful, informative, and moving. Child lost in forest at time of explosion. Mother dies. Father mourns. Several years later, after having lived with wolves in the wild, child is discovered, and is miraculously returned to father who has never given up hope. I drive over to Edith’s house and leave the book there for her to get when she comes home from school. One plot line in this essay is now resolved. As for the other, well, the invasion or non-invasion of Ukraine is still a work in progress. Australia’s Minister for Defence today warns that Russia is ‘on the cusp of an all-out conflict’.

The third angel blows its trumpet silently into the heavens. Moths among the silk and wool choke on the dark and silvery aroma of lavender and wormwood. ▼

Images (from top): Peter Lam; Dmytro Chapman; Nicola di Poli; Inna Dudnik

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Carmel Bird

Carmel Bird is a writer of both fiction and nonfiction. Her first collection of short stories appeared in 1976. Since then she has published novels, essays, anthologies, children's books and also manuals on how to write. Carmel received the Patrick White Literary Award in 2016. Her most recent novel, *Field of Poppies*, was published in 2019. *Telltale: Reading Writing Remembering* is due out in July 2022. Carmel spent her first 22 years in Tasmania, and although she now lives in Victoria, she always identifies as Tasmanian.

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